DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 027 CG 014 257

AUTHOR Feldman, Margaret
TITLE Reaching Teenagers with Sex Information.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (Boston, MA, August 14-18, 1979). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Birth; Females; *Peer Influence; *Pregnant Students; Research Projects; *Sex Education; *Social Problems; State of the Art Reviews; *Student Attitudes; Students

ABSTRACT

The problem of teenage pregnancy can be viewed as endemic, a part of American culture not easy to change. Although the number of girls under 15 who are becoming pregnant is not very large (13,000 in 1978), the cost of pregnancy to the girls themselves, their families, and society is very great. Results of data analyses from action research, Planned Parenthood and Health Department records and literature reviews indicate that: (1) illegitimate birth rates are unrelated to seasonal variation; (2) the major source of sexual information is from peer group members; and (3) there is widespread misinformation about the "safe time," and about availability of contraceptive materials. Intervention projects to deal with adolescent pregnancy can be conducted in school settings, the community, the church, and parent teacher association groups. (Author/HLM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED184027

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Reaching Teenagers With Sex Information

Margaret Feldman

Ithaca College

Paper presented at Family Action Section of National Council of Family Relations Annual Meeting, Boston, Mass., August 1979

CG 014257

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Margaret Feldman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Teenage pregnancy has been called an "epidemic" by many but Jekel and Kelerman in the current "Studies in Family Planning" (Vol 10 No. 3, March 1979) point out that an epidemic is a surprising sudden increase in a phenomenon. The current situation in regard to adolescent pregnancy is that births to all ages except the very youngest teens have gone down and the real concern is that the percentage of births to adolescents has increased because of the greater decreases of all other ages. Jekel and Klerman say the problem of adolescent pregnancy is endemic - a part of our culture and therefore not easy to change.

Our concern is not for the 18 and 19 year olds who consider high school graduation the normal time for family formation, or at least can finish their high school with only one year of support for themselves and a child. Our concern is for the school age girl, 17 and younger, and particularly those under 15. Although the number of girls under 15 who are getting pregnant is not very great, only 13,000 in the whole country in 1978, the cost of pregnancy to the girls themselves, to their families, and to society is very great. When these young girls get pregnant, only a small percentage say they wanted to have a child and therefore got pregnant deliberately. Most are the victims of misinformation or of no information at all.

My research team* of nine undergraduate students and myself have been working this year in our local community to see what we can find out about the level of information among the young people, and see if we can increase that level by a series of methods. Our focus was to use research results to show the direction intervention should take.

In the first place we were interested in finding out what the real situation was, so that we could tell if what we did made any difference.

* Thanks are given to the students who participated in these projects with their ideas, contacts, research and enthusiasm.

We gathered all the information available from Planned Parenthood for girls under 17 about the number of pregnancy tests, decisions to keep pregnancies, and decisions to terminate pregnancies. We plotted these by months. We wanted to see the total number per year, but we were also interested to find out if there were certain months when the incidence was highest so we could make special efforts at certain times. No such special months turned up and the plots showed a good deal of randomness. Data from the Health Department of number of out-of-wedlock births to women under 17 also showed the same randomness, with May being the only month with no births for 1976, 1977 and 1978, our test years. All of these figures then, supported the idea that we are dealing with a year around phenomena , apparently not related to seasonal variation. The number of pregnancy tests is slightly up each year while the number of live births is down each year, showing the effect of more abortions.

Avoiding pregnancy is possible in only two ways: don't have intercourse or use contraception. We are interested in both. We can try to create a climate which supports virginity but keeping information from young people is not keeping them from getting pregnant.

In a review of the literature about adolescent's sources of knowledge about sex, Thornburg (Thornburg, 1974) summarizes by saying that peers are uniformly found to be the major source of sex information. He reports studies from 1969 showing 75% got their information from peers (Elias and Gebhard, 1969) while his own study (Thornburg, 1972) showed 37.9% for peers, the highest percentage for any source. Parents were the second most frequent source 21.1%, with mothers providing practically all the information, literature was third with 20.6% and school fourth with 14%.

These earlier studies may or may not represent the situation in any one city at any one time. Recently a restudy of the famous Middletown study of Muncie, Indiana has been reported. The findings were that boys reporting getting their information from their parents has gone down from one-third to 18% and girls have gone down from two-thirds to one-third. Both boys and girls are less likely than earlier to get their information from their parents. Now one-third of both boys and girls are listing friends as their source, but for girls, this has come up from one-fifth.

So far, we have not done a systematic study of source of information for our area, but it is obvious that children in any one locality will differ from those in another and that there are changes over time.

The interesting finding from these studies, and from many others, is that the major source of information is the peer group itself. And I am convinced that it is the peer group which sets the climate about whether intercourse is acceptable behavior, whether going for a pregnancy test is acceptable, and whether to have an abortion or have the baby is acceptable. Parents have an influence, but the peer group is powerful. My team and I took as our objective, then, getting correct information into the peer group.

What is least known by kids? National studies have shown that there is widespread misinformation about the "safe time." Even though we do not believe there is an absolutely safe time, and even though we are aware of the wide variation in the menstrual cycles of the very young, the kids have heard about a safe time. I read somewhere, but cannot now document the fact that it was only in the 1930's that it was found out that the fertile time is 14 days before the onset of menstruation. Before this time it was thought

that the safe time was between periods. This is still the belief of large numbers of young people today. Kantner and Zelnick in their studies found that in 1971, 38% of young people 15 to 19 could correctly state when the most fertile time was, while by 1976, 41% could correctly state it -- an increase of only 3%.

We were able to quiz 65 junior high students, 28 boys and 37 girls before they had a sex education course. We found that 37% of the boys and 31% of the girls selected the correct alternative, on a multiple choice test indicating that a woman's most "safe" time is not midway between her periods. Twenty-four percent of the girls but only 4% of the boys omitted this question. A junior high school counselor this year told of a young boy who confided in the counselor that he had had his first sex the night before. The counselor asked, "How did you keep from getting the girl pregnant?" The boy said, "Oh, everyone knows that if you have sex between her periods she can't get pregnant." This boy's experience is not unique. Here is a misconception which is being relied on by large numbers of young people in our junior high and yours as their method of contraception for their first sexual encounter and for later sporadic encounters before they accept the fact that they are being sexual and need more effective methods.

How about senior high? We were able to get only a small sample of senior high students but found among our 36 respondents, 14 boys and 22 girls, that 16 of the kids agreed that a woman's most "safe" time is just around or during her menstrual period and 15 thought that it was false that a woman was most fertile during the middle of her cycle. Both wrong answers! These tests were given after a course in sex education by a dedicated teacher who clearly put out the facts! These findings truly support the statement that "teaching sex education in school is like carrying water in a basket." Still, we must not stop teaching sex education in the schools because each source will reach some children and more senior high than junior high knew the correct answer.

A second major lack of information is the knowledge that it is possible to buy contraceptives, condom and foam, in the drugstore regardless of your age. Only 41% of junior high boys and 20% of girls knew this but 85% of senior high boys and 70% of girls gave the correct answer.

Our objectives, then, became to work from all possible angles to increase the level of correct information among the peer group. Here are the projects:

Project I

It is estimated that 95% of teens listen to the radio on any one day. Therefore, use the media of radio as a message carrier. We got some public service announcements from Population Institute. Here is an example:

"The Population Institute of America asked Rod Carew if he thinks guys are embarrassed to talk about birth control. His reply:

'I don't think they should be embarrassed about it. Get it out into the open or suffer the consequences. If they're in it just for a fling, then they should start using something to protect the girls also. But no matter what, there's nothing wrong in talking about it."

We added to this: "Nobody wins with an unwanted pregnancy. For more information call for the fact of the week, 273-1513, after 5 and on weekends."

Those who called in were to be given the taped Fact of the Week.

"Good Evening, this is your fact of the week.

In a recent survey at Ithaca High School, 45% of those surveyed did not remember that a woman's most fertile time is two weeks before her next period begins. So, if you think you are using rhythm as a method of birth control, be sure to remember the safe time is <u>not</u> between periods. If you would like a confidential consultation about sexuality or contraception,

call this number during business hours and ask for Kim. The number is 273-1513."

A second fact of the week was:

"Good Evening, this is your fact of the week.

Many teenagers in a recent survey did not know that it is law that any teenagers can walk into a drugstore and buy foam and condoms. When used together, foam and condom are just as effective as the birth control pill. These contraceptives by state law, must be displayed visibly by the drugist. They cannot be hidden under the counter. This means you don't even have to ask for them. So next time you're in a drugstore, check around for future reference. Remember the best protection is prevention. For more information call 273-1513 and ask for Kim."

Kim was the code name to be used to count how many people responded to the fact of the week by calling for a consultation. We had no way to count the number who called for the fact of the week.

There is always a slippage between what we set out to do and what gets accomplished. It turned out that the quality of the tapes from the Population Institute was not up to the standard required by our radio stations and by the time my student had finally gotten new scripts taped the semester was over. Without the input from the radio, people did not call in for the fact of the week, and of course did not ask for the consultations. We put up posters but they got torn down. Next semester we plan to ask students their favorite Cornell sports star and see if we can get some locally produced tapes of high quality and try again. You will note that our plan called for making use of two of the teen agers favorite media, the radio and the phone. We thought that our phone-in Fact of the Week would give the kids a useful phone number to call and should effectively penetrate the teenage information system.

Project II

Even though kids might know that they could go into a pharmacy and buy condoms and foam, we thought many might feel a good deal of anxiety in doing it. Two of my students recruited four high school students to do a pharmacy survey. They were trained to go into a pharmacy and buy a condom and then ask the pharmacist some questions and examine the display of products. Training consisted of role playing what to do if the pharmacist gave them a hard time. If the pharmacist seemed disapproving they were to say, "Would you rather I get the girl pregnant?" The students were surprised to find that all but one of the pharmacists in Ithaca area did not mind selling contraceptives to minors although most did not sell many to this age group. As a result of this project we have a rating of all the pharmacies and are planning to see if the high school newspaper will publish an article about the results.

The high school students participating in this survey found, as we had hoped, that as a result of their experiences they felt much more comfortable about buying contraceptives and now would not "think twice about it." We had hoped that those doing the survey would tell their friends about their experience and that this also would get into the teenage network. We were disappointed to find that only one of the four had told friends,but maybe as a function of our asking if they had told others we hope they will be encouraged to do so. The survey should alert the pharmacists to the need to be available to young people.

Project III

Our third project was work with a neighborhood group. Next year we plan to extend this work to other groups. A group of mothers and daughters

were recruited by personal invitation. Although not all came, a small nucleus had a total of four meetings. The emphasis of the first meeting was to provide information that there was a problem of adolescent pregnancy and sexuality in our town as well as all of the United States and that this group was an attempt to recruit some knowledgeable advocates who would be able to see that correct information got to teenage friends who did not have correct information. After explaining the problem, the group was asked what they thought would be a good strategy. They suggested that not everyone knew where Planned Parenthood was so they could get help when needed. A trip was arranged and Planned Parenthood people were most gracious and informative on a Sunday afternoon. The girls were urged to become advocates and some may become members of a teen advisory board and possibly volunteers during the summer.

Another activity of the group was a discussion of Sol Gordon's book, "You Would If You Loved Me" (Dell paperback) -- a discussion of lines boys and girls use on each other. Discussion of lines leads to a discussion of sex as a voluntary activity that each person can indulge in or not as he or she is ready. We tried to get the girls to accumulate "lines" from their teen group and to write an article for the school paper. This did not get done, but might be an activity for another group another year.

Project IV

A survey of the churches. We sent questionnaires to all 50 churches listed in the Ithaca phone book and responses were obtained from 15, although some of these had to be phoned to get their answer. Two churches give sex information through their regular school, one gives information informally (not defined), six have a regular program as part of their youth program, one said their parishioners were all elderly so no program was appropriate,

and five said they had no sex education program for the young people. When asked the best way for children to get information about sexuality, six of the respondents said the parents and two more said parents and church, and seven churches said they had special programs for parents to help them teach their children. Only four of those answering said that the schools should not teach sex education. Many of the largest churches in the area did not answer our questionnaire. Two churches we phoned said they were embarrassed that they had no program and one was planning a program for next year. I think it would be worthwhile to go to the ministerial association to talk with them about the situation in our town. The survey served the purpose of reminding the churches of their responsibility.

Project V.

Last, but not least, we are trying to give parents the information they need to become the educators of their children. The PTA Council was sent copies of Sol Gordon's booklet, "Sex Education: the Parent's Role" and the Council was encouraged to take on as a project, the distribution of these pamphlets to all of the school district's parents of 5th grade and up -- or all parents. Due to the intense preoccupation of the district with re-organization, the Council expressed interest but was not able to make final decisions. I understand some individual PTA's have decided to go ahead with this on their own.

Summary:

Taking as our objective to get correct information into the teenage network we have carried out a number of innovative projects and encouraged the regular agencies of school, church and parents to increase their input. Some data have been gathered but these projects have been action research - research which changes both the people who do the study and those who are studied. There is still much to do and since children inexorably grow up, what we have done will need to be done each year. 11

REFERENCES

Elias, J. and P. Gebhard. Sexuality and Sexual Learning in Childhood. Phi Delta Kappan, 1969, 50, 401-406.

Gordon, Sol and Irving R. Dickman. Sex Education: The Parent's Role. Public Affairs Pamphlet #549, 381 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016 50¢ for single copy, 21¢ for 1000 or more.

"Middletown" Restudy: Male Similarities and Drastic Female Changes. Behavior Today, April 23, 1979

Thornburg, H.D. Ages and First Sources of Sex Information as Reported by 88 College Women. Journal of School Health, 1970, 40, 156-168.

Thornburg, Hershel D. Educating The Preadolescent About Sex. Family Coordinator, Jan. 1974, pp. 35-39.

Zelnik, M. & J. F. Kantner. Sexual and Contraceptive Experience of Young Unmarried Women in United States, 1976 and 1971. Family Planning Perspective 9:55, 1977.